

A Work Project, presented as part of the requirements for the Award of a Master's degree in Management from the Nova School of Business and Economics.

THE EFFECT OF GAP YEARS ON
SENSE OF PURPOSE AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

KINGA KÓRÉ

Work project carried out under the supervision of:

Milton Jorge Correia de Sousa

4 January 2020

The Effect of Gap Years on Sense of Purpose and Career Development

Abstract

Gap year is an extended traveling experience when people explore pristine places and distant cultures often through not only travelling but volunteering or working. It allows them to take a break between life stages and contemplate their next step. The fundamental aim of this research was to better understand, via grounded theory formulation, how sense of purpose evolves in the context of gap years and its influence on career development. The research shows gap years positively affected participant's sense of purpose through identity work and sensemaking, which led to the more conscious and active development of their career path.

Keywords: Gap Year, Purpose, Career Path, Identity, Sensemaking

This work used infrastructure and resources funded by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (UID/ECO/00124/2013, UID/ECO/00124/2019 and Social Sciences DataLab, Project 22209), POR Lisboa (LISBOA-01-0145-FEDER-007722 and Social Sciences DataLab, Project 22209) and POR Norte (Social Sciences DataLab, Project 22209).

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Theory of Sense of Purpose	4
Methodology	6
Data Collection	6
The sample.....	7
Method of Data Analysis	8
Findings	11
Discussion of Grounded Theory Model	21
Pre-Gap-Year Identity Ambiguity	22
In-Gap-Year Identity Work	22
Post-Gap-Year Sensemaking	23
Cognitive Shift in Career	23
Conclusion.....	24
References	25
Appendices	27

Introduction

'Where is my life going? What do I want to do with it? What am I passionate about?' These are just some of the questions people might ask themselves when they feel they arrived at a junction in life, when they feel stuck or unsatisfied with their current situation. Surprisingly, more and more people wish to find the answers to these existential questions by going on an extended traveling experience, exploring pristine places and distant cultures while leaving their comfort zone behind. In plain English, by going on a gap year. As opposed to the common misconception, a gap year can be of any length, usually, between three to twenty-four months might include volunteering, working, or simply travelling. It allows people to take a break between two distinct life stages and contemplate their next step.

Most researches on gap years focus on the period between high school and university (e.g. A. King 2011). Furthermore, these tend to focus on travellers from a specific nation, e.g. the UK, Australia, South Africa (Coetzee and Bester 2009, Inkson and Myers 2003, Johan, Sadler-Smith and Tribe 2019). Therefore, there are not many pieces of research exploring how gap years affect career choices in general. However, an increasing number of young adults and young professionals choose to do a gap year later in their life, either after their higher education or during their early career. In carrying out this research, the fundamental question was what effects a gap year has on sense of purpose and career development.

Finding purpose in life can give it structure, predictability, and a general direction resulting in consistency in one's actions that are either in favour of one's ambitions or hinder them (Martela and Steger 2016). Consequently, this also affects one's actions and choices regarding their career development. However, there is little understanding of how this phenomenon occurs. The objective was to better understand how sense of purpose is experienced, developed, and expressed in the context of gap years and the influence it has on the career path of participants from different backgrounds afterwards. The research paper is structured as follows: first,

relevant literature is reviewed; second, methodology and data collection principles are outlined; third, findings are presented concerning developing a sense of purpose during the gap year and the effects on career development post-gap-year; fourth, the four-stage grounded theory model of how sense of purpose evolves is presented; and last, practical implications of the research, its limitations, and future opportunities are discussed.

Theory of Sense of Purpose

Meaning in life is a widely researched topic in modern psychology. The way people make sense of their surroundings and events they experience has fascinated researchers even though it is a challenging field to interpret and “it remains a very fuzzy concept, defined in different ways by different researchers” (Leontiev 2013). Meaning is often used interchangeably with purpose (e.g. Reker, Peacock and Wong 1987) referring to having “a sense of core goals, aims and direction in life” (Martela and Steger 2016). Further on, these two terms will be used synonymously.

Although research on meaning in life has often focused on the effects of negative events, according to King and Hicks (2009) both positive and negative experiences can lead to meaning in life. However, positive experiences aid meaning detection, reinforcing pre-existing assumptions about life, while negative ones contribute to meaning construction, trying to make sense of what happened.

One frequently used method by researchers to identify sense of purpose in life is examining narrative identity. Narrative identity is the internal discourse, the story people tell themselves trying to interpret and make sense out of life events. By understanding how these events relate to each other in the past, present, and future, people develop a story about how they became who they are today (McAdams and Guo 2014). This translates into learning and growing from the constructed stories of life experiences. “Each addition to the ongoing life narrative offers another opportunity for individuals to understand where they belong in the world and to

determine what takes them closer or further away from the goals to which they aspire” (Singer 2004), their purpose in life. This phenomenon was labelled as “sensemaking” by Karl E. Weick. He states that “The basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs.” (Weick 1993). Furthermore, Morgan, Frost, and Pondy (1983) also came to the conclusion that people try to rationalize their actions by searching for patterns of meaning in events they experience.

Finding purpose in life can give it structure and predictability as, in coordination with values, purpose directs one’s behaviour, actions and focus towards what is important and what can be ignored, resulting in behavioural consistency (Martela and Steger 2016). Having said that it must be added that sense of purpose is not static, it tends to evolve over time especially in response to life-changing events such as a gap year (Dhingra, et al. 2020). Since gap years tend to involve a series of transformative experiences they allow for self-reflection, confronting and re-evaluating one’s status quo and fundamental beliefs.

People can have several purposes in life, personal and professional aspirations, yet these do not prevail in all actions of a person. However, several overarching purposes can provide an integrative framework for a large proportion of one’s actions. These can be interpreted as themes in the narrative, and actions can be evaluated based on whether they help that person get closer to their purpose or the opposite, hinder them (Baumeister and Wilson 1996).

Furthermore, sense of purpose plays a pivotal role in one’s professional performance as well. Those with careers that are in harmony with their personal values and goals tend to find their jobs more meaningful hence fulfilling, resulting in increased productivity (Dhingra, et al. 2020). However, it is still unclear how one integrates and fosters this sense of personal purpose in career, hence the research focuses on the evolution of sense of purpose in individuals who undertook a gap year and how their career shifted in response to this.

Methodology

Data Collection

The data discussed in this paper were gathered using semi-structured, in-depth interviews ranging from thirty to seventy-five minutes conducted by the author. The interviews were viewed as a discursive space to reflect on the participants' experiences, emotions, and understanding of the gap year experience as a whole. At the beginning of each interview, participants were invited to tell a detailed account of their gap year and their career development afterwards with the help of open-ended guiding questions exploring the topics of motivation, distinct chapters during the gap year, memorable moments, learnings, plans for the future at the end of the gap year, life projects, career before and after the gap year, and fundamental values and beliefs. These topics divided the interview into four parts:

- Part I covered the participant's motivation to do a gap year and allowed them to tell a chronological account of their experience using an adapted version of The Life Story Interview by Dan P. McAdams (2007). First participants were asked to divide their gap year into two to ten chapters, giving a brief plot summary of each. Then the focus was on critical moments, such as a high point, low point, and turning point that could be significant for the future. In the end, participants elaborated on why they ended their gap year, whether it was a conscious decision or they were forced by outside factors to return.
- Part II covered a subjective account of participants of their acquired and enhanced skills, their plans, hopes, and dreams for the future at the time, and how their life turned out to be in reality. Furthermore, they were asked to elaborate on their life projects, something they have been working on and plan on working on in the future related to their family, career, hobbies, vocation, or pastime (McAdams 2007).
- Part III covered the employment history of participants including career positions and direction before and after the gap year experience, the extent of fulfilment in each job,

the effect of gap year on their career prospects and employability, their willingness to work abroad, and how it was affected by their experience, and plans for the future both career-wise and personally.

- Part IV covered important shifts and changes in the fundamental values and beliefs of participants following the gap year including social and environmental concerns, values being reflected in their career, and the obstacles that prevent this. Last but not least, participants were asked to reflect on the emotions and thoughts they had during the interview.

As the research progressed, new relevant questions emerged which required following up with participants who were interviewed beforehand. The complete list of questions can be found in Appendix 1. For accuracy, each interview was voice recorded and transcribed by the author. The interview transcriptions run to an average of 5,100 words and little to no value was lost. Furthermore, each participant was asked to fill out a demographics and personal values questionnaire before the interview. For the latter, participants had to rate the importance of the ten basic personal values as defined by Schwartz's short personal value survey (Lindeman and Verkasalo 2005): power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security (Appendix 2).

The sample

In total, nineteen participants were recruited by snowball sampling, where respondents nominate further respondents. To qualify for inclusion, participants were required to have spent at least three months abroad working, or volunteering, or travelling at any point in their life. In case of more than one gap year experience, each was briefly discussed and the most relevant with respect to career development was then explored during the interview. For example, if a participant completed a gap year after high school and then went on to continue their studies, and completed another gap year after bachelor studies and then started their career, the latter

was considered relevant for the purpose of the research. The aim was to sample as many different gap year experiences as possible. Exchange semesters were excluded from the research. Moreover, participants were required to have a job at the time of the interview. There were no criteria regarding the date of having finished the gap year therefore the data shows great variance ranging from eight months to sixteen years prior to the interview. However, looking at the elaborate accounts of gap year experiences it is impossible to tell the difference between participants who returned a couple of months ago and those who did so almost two decades ago.

The sample of nineteen contained seven female and twelve male participants from all over the world (Portugal (7), New Zealand (2), Australia (1), South Africa (1), Hungary (1), Romania (1), Germany (1), the Netherlands (1), Belgium (1), Switzerland (1), Great Britain (1), America (1)). The majority of the participants completed their gap year during their career, or after their bachelor studies (Appendix 3). The mean length of gap year taken by the participants was 10.4 months, the median 10 months with a standard deviation of 5.5 months. There were two exceptionally long experiences, both 24 months, undertaken by an Australian man and a New Zealander woman, two nations where doing a gap year or an extended overseas experience is a common practice (Inkson and Myers 2003). The most visited regions were South America, Europe, and South Asia. However, the sample may be biased in this regard due to its ‘snowball’ nature.

Method of Data Analysis

A vast amount of qualitative data was collected describing a phenomenon that is not widely understood, therefore the Gioia method was found most suitable as the method of analysis, which is a systematic approach to new concept development and grounded theory articulation (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton 2012). Grounded theory articulation is one of the most widely used qualitative research designs (Birks, Hoare and Mills 2019) which was chosen this time

due to its ability to “generate a general explanation of a process, action or interaction” (Creswell, Hanson and Plano Clark 2007). Therefore, the resulting theory is “grounded” in the data collected. Qualitative research is often criticised for its lack of rigor. Nonetheless, via the Gioia methodology, as it is described later on, it is feasible to conduct holistic, “qualitatively rigorous inductive studies” (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton 2012). First, using participants' terms, a myriad of reoccurring codes and categories were identified. To reduce the number of categories to a manageable number, they were merged or grouped based on similarities and differences, forming the first-order concepts. The categories seemingly referring to the same notion or showing a significant level of connection were given a more abstract label, second-order themes. These were then carefully considered looking for emerging concepts and aggregated theoretical dimensions that aim to explain the phenomenon of gap years which resulted in the emergence of four conceptual categories: identity ambiguity, identity work, sensemaking, and cognitive shift in career. Figure 1 illustrates the inductive reasoning leading to these four theoretical dimensions.

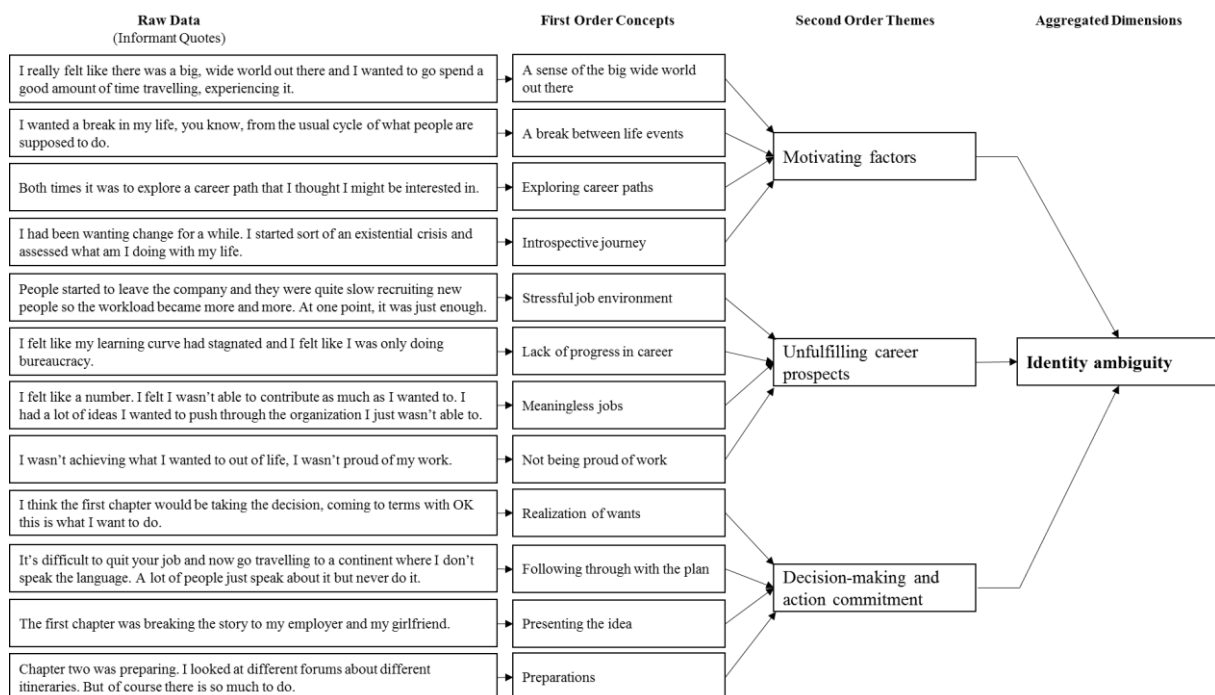


Figure 1.1 Inductive Reasoning: The Gioia Method

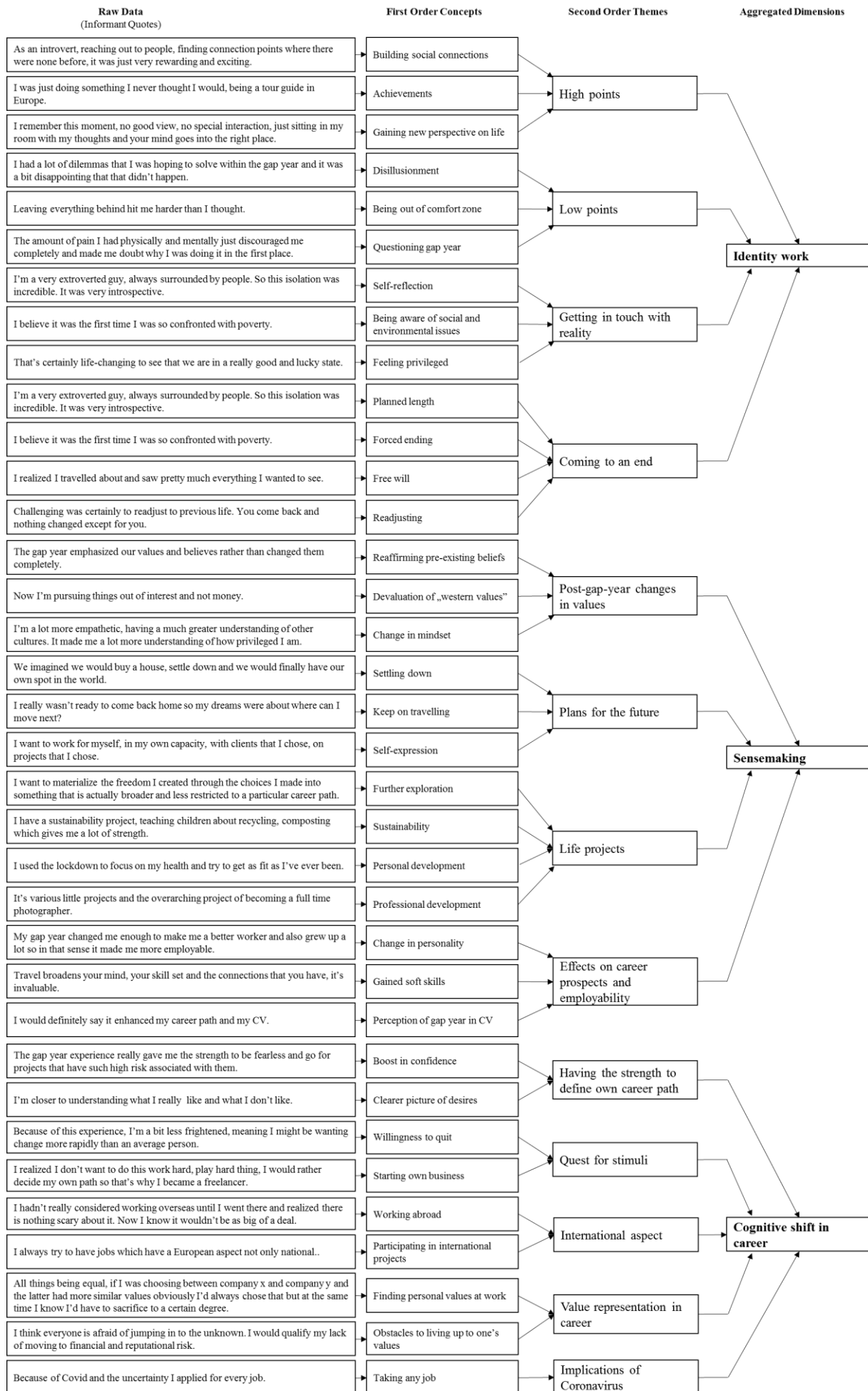


Figure 1.2 Inductive Reasoning: The Gioia Method (continued)

In the next section, a more thorough analysis of informant codes supporting the emergence of second-order themes is presented, followed by a discussion of their interconnectedness and the development of theoretical dimensions and their implications for understanding the effects of gap year on sense of purpose and career development.

Findings

Motivations The first question in each interview inquired about the motivations of participants for going on a gap year. The most common ambition mentioned was seeking adventure, narrated by participants as “immerse [oneself] in something different”, “having a sense of the big wide world out there”, and “discovering the world”. Another reoccurring theme was the need for a break either between two major life stages, e.g. studies and career, or a break from social expectations. Participant 18 shared:

“I wanted a break in my life from the usual cycle of what people are supposed to do. (...) I didn’t want to just continue going like a train without any specific meaning or direction just because I was supposed to.”

Professional development goals, such as exploring different career paths, gaining experience in working overseas, and improving hard skills were also mentioned by a few participants, especially among those from the Australasian region where overseas working experience is a social norm (Inkson and Myers 2003). Last but not least, some participants embarked on a rather introspective journey, searching for answers to existential questions, looking for inspiration, fulfilling dreams, and following their passion.

Unfulfilling Career Unfulfilling career prospects could also be listed as a motivating factor. However, none of the participants mentioned it when specifically asked about their motivation to do a gap year. This phenomenon emerged when asked about their career history and the data shows that it is an underlying factor of general dissatisfaction in life but not a motivating factor on its own. Besides, an unfulfilling career is a breeding ground for questioning one’s purpose and direction in life. Participant 20 who mentioned “feeling stuck in the same position”, “what

am I doing with my life?” and “following passion” for photography as motivations, later went on to talk about his level of fulfilment in his career before the gap year:

“I didn’t have a fulfilling career in terms of I wasn’t achieving what I wanted out of life in a sense that I’m not proud of the work I had. If someone asked me to show them my work [now] I would be proud to show them my photo series or published articles. Back then, if someone asked the same, it would have been an excel spreadsheet or a campaign on my computer.”

Decision Making and Action Commitment Some participants described a “leap of faith” which relates to making up one’s mind, deciding to engage in a gap year experience, and following through with it. This topic emerged when participants were asked to divide their gap year story into chapters as if it was a book. Seven out of nineteen mentioned the decision making and detaching from normal life as chapter zero or one. Furthermore, two more participants expressed being proud of having had the courage to make the decision and go on a gap year because many people have the same fantasy but it is never realised. Decision making and action commitment also involve presenting the idea of a gap year to family, friends, and employer and persuading them and oneself of the legitimacy and necessity of the decision. The following planning and preparations are seen as laying the basis for detaching oneself from the previous chapter of their life and getting emotionally and physically ready to embark on the journey.

In the next stage of the interview participants were asked about critical moments during their gap years such as high points, low points, and turning points, having significant consequences for their future self. Participants were asked to give at least one detailed account of an event for each point, including the surroundings of the event, their emotions, and thoughts and why they think it is an important part of their gap year story and life.

High Points Three distinct reoccurring topics could be identified regarding positive experiences: building social connections, achievements, and gaining a new perspective on life. Participants mentioned meeting fellow travellers and locals, making new friends, and creating connections as an enriching and joyous moment. Even though most of these acquaintances did

not last long as they continued on their own path, this is exactly what made these connections special. As Participant 7 put it:

“Those were the little moments I really liked because it was a friendship of a few days, you just have fun with [new friends] for like 2-3 days but then you separate again which is kind of sad but then it’s also rich time you spend together. It’s more intense.”

Almost all participants mentioned at least one high point related to personal achievements. These included strenuous physical activities such as a 3-day run across the Namib Desert, several-day-long solo hikes in Patagonia, and conquering the historical sanctuary of Machu Picchu before sunrise. These were one-of-a-kind, once-in-a-lifetime challenges that participants had aspired to achieve for a long time. As told by Participant 14:

“I climbed a mountain in Bolivia which is a 6000-metre summit and it’s quite a physically hard thing to do because of the altitude. Just standing there on top of the clouds and the trek up the mountain was almost like a metaphor for the whole gap year trip adventure in itself, so I will always remember that. I actually got quite emotional once I got to the top.”

Others mentioned feeling grown-up, being able to deal with unfamiliar situations, and simply not being scared anymore in a foreign country or a new job. These achievements which they had never thought they would be capable of gave all participants a boost in confidence, made them feel independent and self-sufficient and these are the memories they go back to when feeling under the weather.

Last but not least, gaining a new perspective on life was also a frequently mentioned topic. The related events participants described were not as exhilarating and adrenalin-packed as the previous ones. Instead, they were usually relaxed moments, often surrounded by nature, peaceful moments of reflection, and awareness. Participants described these incomprehensible events as "Your mind just goes into the right place, something just clicks.", "Everything felt it made sense.". The account of Participant 18 of such an event:

"Life was slow, there were no big problems around, and everyone was just living day to day. Then one day we went for a boat ride at night and at night the river has bioluminescent phytoplankton that glows in the dark, and you could see the stars very well, and then the trees had fireflies. Everything was really shining, the water, the trees, the stars and just that moment

in the boat, hanging out with good people... I think it made me feel alive and happy and fulfilled I guess. Made me feel like I was in the right place at the right time."

Low Points Another critical moment was facing hardships. While almost all participants said it was difficult to choose only one high point because there were so many, when it came to talking about negative experiences they were quick to identify the most distressing event, except for 2 participants who reported no significant troubles. Even though it was unpleasant, sometimes difficult for participants to recall and relive these moments, they were asked to provide as many details as possible about their low point during the gap year. Based on similarities among the accounts, three topics were identified: disillusionment, being out of comfort zone and questioning the gap year. Disillusionment occurred when participants went into the trip with high expectations, e.g. expecting answers to all their existential questions, imagining "living this picture-perfect life abroad", or making a real impact volunteering in a third world country and they were let down. Participant 2 worked with an NGO in Bangladesh and shared the following:

"[To have children debate controversial topics on public TV] that was the low moment. The moment that you realise it crashes your dreams, your idealism, and your vision of the world into a very brutal understanding of the way the world spins and that it's not as straightforward as you would expect (...) and that's the moment I decided not to be part of it."

Leaving one's comfort zone and the related realisations were oftentimes mentioned as well. The majority of solo female travellers experienced some level of unwanted attention from men during their trip to South America and South Asia which stemmed from cultural differences. They told stories of being afraid to walk on the streets alone, being followed, and feeling threatened just because they are women. These participants also recounted being more aware of their surroundings afterwards and being more careful. Other accounts of leaving one's comfort zone included not having a place to call home, leaving everything behind and setting up a new life somewhere else, and falling ill without anyone there to take care of them. These moments often induced homesickness and together with disillusionment led to questioning the decision of going on a gap year. In light of hardships, participants had second thoughts about

giving up their life back home. Some mentioned having thoughts like “What am I doing here?”, “Why am I doing this?”. However, none of the participants ended their gap year and returned home due to these negative events. Moreover, they were later on interpreted as key learning points or life lessons and made people emotionally stronger and better prepared for further adversities in life. When asked about turning points or “aha moments”, participants often referred to these events as such, giving them perspective on life.

Getting in Touch with Reality Visiting faraway places and cultures, experiencing everyday life in a different setting also made participants reflect more on their lives. Many of them mentioned "having more time to think" and "being present" as a key characteristic of their gap year experience. It allowed them to reflect on life, think about what is important to them, and what is not, what they want to do and what they despise. Furthermore, self-reflection also played a pivotal role in "getting in touch with reality" as some expressed and made them more aware of social and environmental issues. For many participants, it was their first time being confronted with deep poverty, lack of education, and the tangible consequences of climate change. Some described this experience as shocking yet an eye-opener. It offered participants to look beyond their social bubble, “see what’s out there”, and get in touch with reality. The following is the account of Participant 10 of South America:

“It’s a completely different world from Europe but I didn’t think so much in terms of poverty but more in terms of accessibility. We saw a lot of waste on the streets like plastic bottles and that sort of things but we thought we couldn’t really judge those things because accessibility to clean water for example is not the same. It definitely kept us in check a bit about judging people.”

At some point during the interview, most participants mentioned feeling privileged and lucky because they were born “in the right place” and their gap year helped them in the realisation of this. Having seen the living conditions in certain parts of these third-world countries and how happy and fulfilled people are there even though they have far less material wealth led to self-

reflection and the re-evaluation of taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs. Participant 12 recounted this process as follows:

"Spending all these months in Africa highlighted that we are very privileged. We were passing villages with no drinking water. We were crossing areas of deep poverty. That's certainly life-changing to see that we are in a really good and lucky state. And despite of poverty, despite of the way of life, they were super happy people. (...) Just being around them, being happy that was something I realized only after coming home that European people are depressed and unhappy and create problems out of things that may not be problems for anyone else. That was definitely a moment of reflection for me."

These experiences induced a greater appreciation of life and helped participants tame their insatiable desire for more wealth and power.

Coming to an End The last phase of the gap year was the decision to end the journey and return.

The reasons participants finished their gap year could be ordered into three categories: planned length, forced ending, and free will. Some participants reported several of these reasons. Ten participants recalled having planned a specific length because they had time constraints due to international visas, a new job waiting for them back home, or contractual terms of the scholarship through which they funded the gap year. Seven of them were forced to end their trip due to financial constraints, family issues, or worsening physical condition. On the other hand, in five cases participants felt they had achieved what they wanted, they had seen everything they wanted to visit, and continuing would not have added more value to their experience. Therefore, after careful consideration, they decided to finish their gap year and return home. This thought-process illustrated by Participant 10 is as follows:

"[I and my then boyfriend] went on this trip to sort of find ourselves and see what we wanted to do. (...) I think we figured it out quite early in the trip and we were very motivated to go back and do our own thing and get back into life basically. (...) We also decided to go back because we found we weren't enjoying it as much anymore."

However, returning home came with its challenges. Participants experienced difficulties readjusting to normal day-to-day living, "this average European intellectual 9-to-5 life", lacking stimuli and feeling different. Several of them expressed returning as a new person with a broader perspective on life to a world that did not change at all. Furthermore, they found it

difficult to share their experiences and engage with friends and family because they would only hear the nice stories of their incredible journey but would not understand the underlying shift in participants' mentality.

Post-Gap-Year Change in Values When participants were asked whether they experienced a shift in their fundamental values and beliefs the overwhelming majority reported no drastic change rather materialization and reaffirmation of pre-existing principles and devaluation of “western values”: power, wealth, and influence. However, some participants noted having changed “for the absolute best”, abandoning negative habits such as judging others. Moreover, they returned being more open-minded, tolerant, and empathetic. They changed their perspectives, they had a more positive outlook on the future, and they showed a greater appreciation for life as well.

Plans for the Future Participants were also asked about their plans, hopes, and dreams for the future upon their arrival home. While some participants returned to settle down and start building a more established life, others had aspirations to travel more, or even set up a whole new life and career abroad. Some mentioned dreaming about starting their own business, “working for [themselves], in [their] own capacity, with clients that [they choose], on projects that [they] pick”. There were also accounts of artistic endeavour as another form of self-expression such as writing a book or publishing photography of the trip.

Life Projects These aspirations were oftentimes supported by related life projects. All participants mentioned at least one venture they had been working on and planned on continuing it in the future. Four distinct topics emerged in the interviews: further exploration, sustainability-related projects, and personal and professional development goals. “The explorers” recounted delving into different opportunities but they had not found their life project yet, but also participants who consider constant travelling as their life project belong to this group. Another frequently mentioned topic was introducing sustainability to daily life, making

it a habit that influences every decision and choice participants make and raising awareness, and educating their social circle about related issues. For instance, Participant 10 shared the following:

“While I was travelling I started an Instagram where I document my sustainability journey. I think that’s really sort of invested in my life. I also now write about sustainability and I advise companies on sustainability. So I think the side project or hobby of doing my individual journey of trying to produce less waste or use less plastic has evolved into a little bit more of a lifestyle and even a job.”

Personal development goals identified by participants included improving their health, staying physically active throughout their lives, and feeding their curiosity through life-long learning. Last but not least, projects regarding professional development came up in interviews time and again which is understandable knowing that most participants upon their return started, restarted, or continued their career path. They aimed to further develop their skills regarding their passions they discovered through their gap year. Those who started their own businesses, regarded it as a life project and “everything [they] do fuels” that.

Effects on Career Prospects and Employability During the interview, participants elaborated on how their gap year changed their prospects in career and how it affected their employability. While most of them agreed that solely completing a gap year does not automatically translate into increased employability, it provides them with several advantages over candidates who did not have such an experience.

One significant aspect is the change in personality. Participants reported a shift in general attitude to life, being more relaxed, "not taking life so seriously", having more confidence, and "having extra energy to pursue what [they] want to do and to trust [themselves] in whatever [they] do". Participants also recounted having gained valuable soft skills during their travels including better communication skills, adaptability, resilience, tolerance, humbleness, and decision making. In participants' opinion, these are factors that "make their personality more colourful". Participant 12 recalled some job interview experiences as follows:

"After a while, in a job interview my gap year or my book becomes a topic, not because I bring it up but just question follows question and it pops up as a topic. I think a person who is not just a robot but has different skill set, interests is always more perceived as a better candidate than someone who is just a really good excel guru."

Participants also noted "growing up" during the gap year, being more responsible for one's decisions, more independent and self-reliant hence being a better employee. Moreover, those who mention their gap year in their CV felt proud to do so and think it is something that differentiates them from other candidates. Participants who had professional experiences during their gap year unanimously agree that it enhanced, in fact, paved their future career path.

On the other hand, some participants expressed concerns about the perception of having a gap in their professional experience. In countries where overseas experience is a common phenomenon, like the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, people were less concerned but in countries with a more traditional approach to career development, like Portugal, participants mentioned feeling judged. The point of view of Participant 2:

"Despite what people say in good universities that gap year is such a good thing and all employers are going to say 'Yeah that's great, you have done that. This is really amazing and will value it.' The reality is that they don't really do so. I think they don't really get it because a lot of those people, I don't know if it's a generational thing, but they didn't do it (...) and somehow it's just not in the DNA of the corporate culture. (...) I think there is an underestimation of how tough it actually is to go through the emotional cycle of change that you go through."

Having the Strength to Define Own Career Path As mentioned before, participants returned with a boost in confidence and emotional strength and a clearer picture of their desired professional development hence the strength to define their own career path going forward. Participants noted gaining enough strength not only to make decisions that move them closer to their desired career but also to quit jobs where they did not feel fulfilled. When asked about the level of fulfilment in the current job, Participant 4 shared the following:

"[I'm 100% fulfilled] because I'm closer to understand what I like and what I don't, at least at this point in my life (...) I think the gap year experience really gave me strength to be fearless and go for a project [abroad] that has such a high risk associated with it. But at the same time all the rewards that come with it are also higher."

Quest for Stimuli As a result of the above-mentioned strength, participants are looking for constant stimuli as opposed to the traditional career development, climbing the corporate ladder in the same company throughout one's professional life. What is more, some reported willingness to leave a secure job when they feel their learning curve is stagnating or they do not feel their contribution is meaningful. Five out of nineteen participants decided to start their own businesses and quit the traditional 9-to-5 career path.

International Aspect The next implication of a gap year on career development was the introduction of an international aspect. Eleven out of nineteen participants had at least one job abroad after finishing their gap year. Some noted again having the confidence in oneself to make this decision after experiencing it through their travels. The account of Participant 14:

"I hadn't really considered working overseas until I went over there. (...) I'd thought it was scary and a huge change. (...) Now that I have actually been there, and not just that city but anywhere in the world, I know it wouldn't be as big of a deal as I thought it would be before."

However, all participants showed interest in working abroad, for a short period at least, but they could not fulfil this aspiration yet either due to family reasons or their expertise in a field that is specific to their home country. These participants still try to incorporate travel into their careers. Participant 13 is an example of having such a career path in the field of research:

"I love travelling around my country to talk to people and understand their lives and what programs help them and how they could be better. (...) [Working abroad] is not something I would say no to. I think it's just because my professional focus is on national policy, it won't happen. But yeah, I think it's just not the path my career has taken."

Value Representation in Career Last but not least, participants were asked to take a stance on whether their personal values are represented in their career and whether it plays an important role at all. All participants agreed that values play a pivotal role not only in their personal but also in their professional life. However, they find it difficult to find employers with similar values to theirs. Many mentioned "the world is not black or white", "there are grey areas", and "the world is not perfect" referring to the fact that even though value representation in the workplace is important, they have to make ends meet at the end of the month. Therefore they

are willing to compromise but there are some “red zones”. Several participants emphasised they would never work for certain companies or industries because those go completely against their values. As told by Participant 17:

“[In value representation] the obstacle is at the end of the day you have a family to provide and you have your own lifestyle and you know sometimes not everything is possible. But I do have some red lines. For instance, on the types of companies where I’m looking for a job. I don’t say yes to just anything. I don’t work for a tobacco company, even though there is big money and they look for talent [in my field] and I have a lot of friends working there but I just can’t. That’s for me the red zone. Also with pharmaceuticals I have ethical problems.”

Other obstacles in living up to one’s values mentioned by participants were financials, risk of losing reputation, and their own limiting beliefs that hold them back from changing workplaces.

Implications of Coronavirus As mentioned before, some participants were affected by Coronavirus in their search for employment. Due to the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic and fearing an economic crisis participants recalled “applying for just about any job” and taking jobs they normally would not. Participant 18 remembers this period as follows:

“Let’s face it. I came back and two months later the COVID situation started. First I tried to get that job I wanted in [my] field, but it was hard to get it without being a Ph.D. [student]. (...) I thought I would have some time to try and get something without a Ph.D. but then COVID came and I got offered a job. I wasn’t even looking for this job. They approached me (...) and I thought, well, might as well take this job now and then try to move to another job later because yeah the situation kind of didn’t help. But I’m not in my ideal job, not by far.”

The current pandemic made it even more challenging to follow one’s desired career path and find a fulfilling job that is also aligned with one’s values. On the other hand, participants in this situation all regard their current workplace as being only temporary.

Discussion of Grounded Theory Model

Having analysed the interconnectedness of the above mentioned sixteen second-order themes, four theoretical dimensions were identified: identity ambiguity, identity work, sensemaking, and cognitive shift in career. The connections among these themes and theories are illustrated in Figure 2, the grounded theory model. This model provides insights into the implications of

these theoretical dimensions for understanding the effects of gap year on sense of purpose and career development.

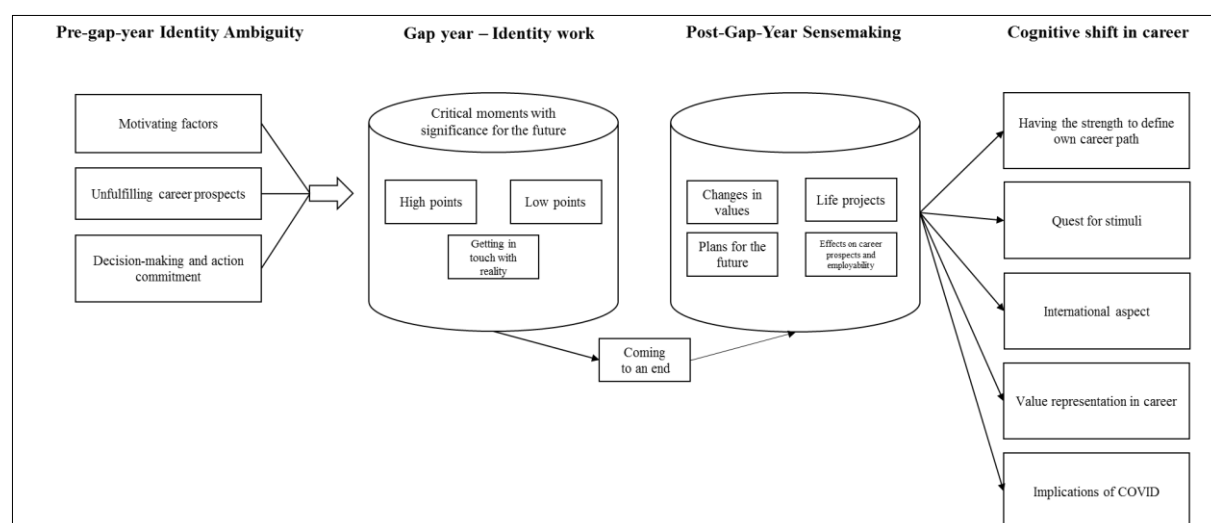


Figure 2 Grounded Theory Model

Pre-Gap-Year Identity Ambiguity

Identity ambiguity or identity searching is the theoretical dimension that plays a pivotal role in realising the need for change and leads to the decision of indeed going on a gap year experience. Motivations, the desire to take a break, gain a broader perspective on life, experience different people, cultures and places, exploring different career paths were previously examined by other researchers (Jones 2004 & Coetzee and Bester 2009). However, the relation between these and the underlying unfulfilling career prospects and the essential decision making and action commitment were not explored previously. These second-order themes describe the thought process leading up to the realisation of a gap year. As described in motivations, having doubts about one's purpose in life and lack of direction are the key characteristics of identity ambiguity but without action commitment, there is no connection to the next stage of identity transformation.

In-Gap-Year Identity Work

The gap year itself constitutes the next stage of transformation, identity work where participants faced critical moments during their gap years, such as high points, low points, and turning points, having significant consequences for their future self. Similar to the 2019 findings of

Johan, Sadler-Smith and Tribe, these moments served as significant learning experiences, allowed participants to engage in self-reflection, and confront their pre-existing identity structure. Returning from the gap year was a bridging element between identity work and the next stage of transformation. It helped participants realise the change they went through by placing them back in their original environment and context which did not change.

Post-Gap-Year Sensemaking

Following identity work through the transformative experience of a gap year and realising the internal changes, participants aimed to understand and make sense of these events, feelings, and thoughts. This is the post-gap-year consolidation or sensemaking phase of transformation through adapting one's choices and actions in daily life. This culminates in developing a sense of purpose and direction in life through explicit plans for the future and life projects that support the materialization of changes in fundamental values and beliefs which are critical components of one's identity and behaviour, therefore, play a crucial role in understanding sense of purpose. This is in accordance with the 2001 research of Oettingen, Pak and Schnetter that emphasises one's ability to attend to novel stimuli and integrate them into conscious thought which is then critical for shifts in job attitudes and setting realistic career goals directed towards self-efficacy and self-actualization.

Cognitive Shift in Career

The next phase is embedding all these experiences and learnings in one's career path leading to a cognitive shift in career development. The research shed light on four pivotal implications of a gap year on career path selection: gaining strength to define own career path, a quest for stimuli, international aspect, and value representation in career. Moreover, participants who finished their gap year and entered the job market in late 2019 or early 2020 were heavily influenced by the appearance of the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) therefore the implications of the pandemic also play a detouring role in career development.

The evidence presented above indicates that gap years indeed positively affect participants' sense of purpose which leads to more conscious and active development of their career path.

Conclusion

While participants had different expectations and motivations for going on a gap year and they had different experiences in distant cultures, the evidence presented above indicates that the outcomes of such an endeavour are comparable among the group of people examined. The gap year indeed positively affected each participant's sense of purpose through identity work and sensemaking, including growing up, gaining a new perspective on life, being better prepared for further adversities, and reaffirming fundamental values and beliefs. This in fact led to the more conscious and active development of their career path. Participants became more deliberate about their career choices in which now personal values play a more important role.

The research explored the so far little understood phenomenon of sense of purpose in the context of gap years and uncovered its effects on career development. Through sensemaking, rationalising, learning and growing, from the constructed stories of the gap year participants were able to direct their focus towards what they find important in life, resulting in behavioural consistency and a more fulfilling career path. Anyone considering taking a gap year can now be assured that no matter the hardships, it is certainly beneficial both personally and professionally to engage in such an endeavour and contributes to leading a more fulfilling life.

Although the cognitive shift in career development of participants in gap years seems significant, further studies involving control groups would be needed to be able to objectively judge the magnitude of the effects. The research was limited by the snowball nature of its relatively small sample. Furthermore, there were no criteria regarding the elapsed time since finishing the gap year which might influence participants' ability to accurately recall certain events, their feelings, and thoughts. Moreover, researches with larger, non-snowball samples, longitudinal follow-ups, and from the perspective of employers could be conducted as well.

References

- Baumeister, Roy F., and Brenda Wilson. "Life Stories and the Four Needs for Meaning." *Psychological Inquiry*, 1996: Vol. 7(4), 322-377.
- Birks, Melanie, Karen Hoare, and Jane Mills. "Grounded Theory: The FAQs." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2019: Vol. 18, 1-7.
- Coetzee, M., and S. Bester. "The possible value of a gap year: A case study." *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 2009: Vol. 23(3), 608–623.
- Creswell, John W., William E. Hanson, and Vicki L. Plano Clark. "Qualitative Research Designs: Selection and Implementation." *The Counseling Psychologist*, 2007: Vol. 35(2), 236-264.
- Dhingra, Naina, Jonathan Emmett, Andrew Samo, and Bill Schaninger. "Igniting individual purpose in times of crisis." *McKinsey Quarterly*. 18 August 2020. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/igniting-individual-purpose-in-times-of-crisis> (accessed November 22, 2020).
- Gioia, Dennis A., Kevin G. Corley, and Aimee L. Hamilton. "Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology." *Organizational Research Methods*, 2012: Vol. 16(1), 15-31.
- Inkson, Kerr, and Barbara A. Myers. "'The Big OE': Self-directed Travel and Career Development." *Career Development International*, 2003: Vol. 8(4), 170-181.
- Johan, Novie, Eugene Sadler-Smith, and John Tribe. "Informal and Incidental Learning in the Liminal Space of Extended Independent (Gap Year) Travel." *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 2019: Vol. 18(3), 388–413.
- Jones, Dr. Andrew. *Review of Gap Year Provision*. London: University of London, Department for Education and Skills, 2004.
- King, Andrew. "Minding the gap? Young people's accounts of taking a Gap Year as a form of identity work in higher education." *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2011: Vol. 14(3), 341-357.
- King, Laura A., and Joshua A. Hicks. "Detecting and constructing meaning in life events." *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2009: Vol. 4(5), 317-330.
- Leontiev, D.A. "Personal meaning: A challenge for psychology." *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2013: Vol. 8(6), 459-470.
- Lindeman, M., and M. Verkasalo. "Measuring values with the Short Schwartz's Value Survey." *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 2005: 85(2), 170-178.
- Martela, Frank, and Michael F. Steger. "The three meanings of meaning in life: Distinguishing coherence, purpose and significance." *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2016: Vol 11(5), 531-545.
- McAdams, Dan P. "The Life Story Interview – II." *Northwestern University - The Study of Lives Research Group*. 2007. <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.northwestern.edu/dist/4/3901/files/2020/11/The-Life-Story-Interview-II-2007.pdf> (accessed September 15, 2020).
- McAdams, Dan P., and Jennifer Guo. "How Shal I Live? Constructing a Life Story in the College Years." *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2014: Vol. 166, 15-23.

- Morgan, Gareth, Peter J. Frost, and Louis R. Pondy. "Organizational Symbolism." In *Organizational Symbolism*, by Louis R. Pondy, Peter J. Frost, Thomas C. Dandridge, Gareth Morgan and Samuel B. Bach, 3-35. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1983.
- Oettingen, G., H.-J. Pak, and K. Schnetter. "Self-regulation of goal setting: Turning free fantasies about the future into binding goals." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2001: Vol. 80(5), 736-753.
- Reker, Gary T., Edward J. Peacock, and Paul T.P. Wong. "Meaning and Purpose in Life and Well-Being: A Life-Span Perspective." *Journal of Gerontology*, 1987: Vol. 42(1), 44-49.
- Singer, Jefferson A. "Narrative Identity and Meaning Making Across the Adult Lifespan: An Introduction." *Journal of Personality*, 2004: Vol. 72(3), 437-460.
- Weick, Karl E. "The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1993: Vol. 38, 628-652.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Script adapted from The Life Story Interview by Dan P. McAdams (2007)

I. Introduction

This is an interview about the story of your gap year and your career development afterwards. I will ask you to focus on a few key scenes and ideas in your gap year. There are no right or wrong answers to my questions. Instead, your task is simply to tell me about some of the most important things that have happened and how you imagine your life and career developing in the future. I will guide you through the interview so that we finish it all in about 45 minutes or less.

II. Chapters

1. First of all, what motivated you to go on a gap year?
2. Now think of your gap year as if it were a book- a novel with chapters. What would the chapters be? Divide your gap year into its main chapters, preferably between 2 and 5 chapters, and for each chapter provide a title and a brief plot summary. Explain what marks the end of one chapter and the beginning of the next.

III. Key Scenes

Now that you have described the overall plot outline for your gap year, I would like you to focus in on a few key scenes that stand out in the story. Consider a key scene to be a moment in your gap year story that stands out for a particular reason – perhaps because it was especially good or bad, particularly vivid, important, or memorable. For each of the three key events we will consider, I ask that you describe in detail what happened, and what you were thinking and feeling in the event. In addition, I ask that you tell me why you think this particular scene is important or significant in the context of your gap year. What does the scene say about you as a person? Please be specific.

3. High Point

Please describe a scene, episode, or moment in your gap year that stands out as an especially positive experience. This might be the high point scene of your entire gap year, or else an especially happy, joyous, exciting, or wonderful moment in the story.

4. Low Point

The second scene is the opposite of the first. Thinking back over your entire gap year, please identify a scene that stands out as a low point. Even though this event is unpleasant, I would appreciate your providing as much detail as you can about it. Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so bad and what the scene may say about you or your life.

5. Turning Point (Aha moment)

In looking back over your gap year, it may be possible to identify certain key moments that stand out as turning points - episodes that marked an important change in you or your gap year story. If you cannot identify a key turning point that stands out clearly, please describe some event in your gap year wherein you went through an important change of some kind. What was the challenge or problem? How did the challenge or problem develop? How did you address or deal with this challenge or problem? What is the significance of this challenge or problem in your own gap year story?

6. Why did you end your gap year when you ended it? Did you plan on finishing it at a specific time or were there any other reasons why you returned?

7. What skills and abilities did you acquire or enhance during your gap year?

IV. Imagined Future

8. How did you imagine the next chapter of your life? Describe your career plans, dreams and hopes for the future at the time? How did you plan to achieve those goals?

V. Reality

9. Describe how your life turned out in reality. Did you manage to achieve your previously defined goals? Did your plans change along the way? In what direction?

10. Do you have a project in life? A life project is something that you have been working on and plan to work on in the future chapters of your life story, let's say a side hustle. The project might involve your family or your work life, or it might be a hobby, a vocation, or pastime. Tell me what the project is, how you got involved in the project, how the project might develop, and why you think this project is important for you or for other people.

VI. Career

11. If you were employed, what did you do before your gap year?

12. Did you have a fulfilling career? Please explain!

13. Do you think your gap year experience increased your employability and improved your prospects in your career? Did it change your stance towards your career?

14. What do you do now? Is it more fulfilling than your previous jobs?

15. After your gap year, has your willingness to work abroad changed? How?

16. How do you imagine your career in the future? Would you do another gap year?

VII. Ideology & Values

Now, I would like to ask a few questions about your fundamental beliefs and values and about meaning in your life. Values illuminate the direction in which you must travel to experience a meaningful life hence better understanding our values will help finding our purpose.

17. As you gain experience, your values may change slightly over time. Have they changed in any important ways during your gap year? Please explain.

18. Are there particular social or environmental issues or causes about which you feel strongly? Please explain.

19. Are your personal values reflected in your career? Is it important for you that the company you work for has similar values to yours?

20. What are the obstacles that hold you back from living up to your values and prevent you from feeling fulfilled?

VIII. Reflection

Thank you for this interview. I have just one more question for you. Many of the stories you have told me are about experiences that stand out from the day-to-day. For example, we talked about a high point, a turning point, and your values. Given that most people don't share their gap year stories in this way, I'm wondering if you might reflect for one last moment about what this interview has been like for you. What were your thoughts and feelings during the interview?

Appendix 2: The Short Schwartz's Value Survey

	Opposed to my principles	Not important			Important			Of supreme importance	
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. POWER (social power, authority, wealth)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
2. ACHIEVEMENT (success, capability, ambition, influence on people and events)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
3. HEDONISM (gratification of desires, enjoyment in life, self-indulgence)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
4. STIMULATION (daring, a varied and challenging life, an exciting life)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
5. SELF-DIRECTION (creativity, freedom, curiosity, independence, choosing one's own goals)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
6. UNIVERSALISM (broad-mindedness, beauty of nature and arts, social justice, a world at peace, equality, wisdom, unity with nature, environmental protection)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
7. BENEVOLENCE (helpfulness, honesty, forgiveness, loyalty, responsibility)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
8. TRADITION (respect for tradition, humbleness, accepting one's portion in life, devotion, modesty)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9. CONFORMITY (obedience, honoring parents and elders, self-discipline, politeness)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
10. SECURITY (national security, family security, social order, cleanliness, reciprocation of favors)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Appendix 3: At what point in your life did you do your gap year?